

\$7 million fine urged for USX

Violations cited at two plants

By Lisa Ellis
Inquirer Staff Writer

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration yesterday proposed fines of \$7.3 million, a national record, against USX Corp. for about 2,000 violations at its Fairless Works in Fairless Hills and Clairton Coke Works near Pittsburgh.

The \$6,095,600 fine proposed at the Fairless Works — site of three worker deaths in the last two years — is the largest ever proposed for violations at a single work site, said Jack Hord, a spokesman for the U.S. Labor Department's Philadelphia regional office.

In each of those three deaths, the company was cited for safety violations, said Marie Shanahan, assistant administrator of OSHA for the Philadelphia region. Those violations have been corrected and the fines levied for them have been paid, she said.

The fines proposed yesterday resulted from a June 7 inspection at the Fairless Works that found related deficiencies, she said. "The condition that caused the fatality was corrected, but we found similar violations in other parts of the plant," Shanahan said.

For example, one of the three deaths at the Fairless Works occurred when an outside contract worker fell through a rusted platform and into a vat of hot metal. Yesterday's citations, Shanahan said, included 307 allegations of unsafe walking or working surfaces, including rusted or deteriorated walkways or platforms.

"Company managers have known about many of these safety and health deficiencies for years, yet have failed to take action to correct the hazards," Gerard F. Scannell, assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor, said in a statement yesterday.

A USX spokesman did not return telephone calls yesterday afternoon.

USX has 15 working days to contest the citations and proposed penalties before the independent Occupational Safety and Health Review Commission.

The citations at the Clairton works
(See USX on 7-B)

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USX, from 1-B resulted from a May 8 inspection that was prompted by complaints from the United Steelworkers of America. "The complaint was given to OSHA only after the company stonewalled for over a year," said Michael Wright, national director of safety and health for the union.

At Fairless, complaints by four employees at the Bucks County plant, as well as the three fatalities, triggered the inspection.

Wright said that the union would have gone to OSHA about problems at the Fairless Works sooner but that it was still trying to get the company to correct problems voluntarily at the time of the inspection.

"About a year ago in the Fairless plant we thought the situation was so bad that we proposed the step of having the union and company do a comprehensive health and safety evaluation," he said.

The company refused the request, which came during negotiations over a USX plan to institute random drug testing at the plant, Wright said.

USX proposed the expanded testing after a worker involved in an October 1988 fatality tested positive for drugs. The union contended that the accident was caused by safety problems. OSHA cited the company for several violations at the time.

In a statement released yesterday, Secretary of Labor Elizabeth Hanford Dole said the penalties resulted from "corporate indifference to worker safety and health and severe cutbacks in the maintenance and repair programs needed to remove those hazards."

"Particularly flagrant are the company's numerous failures to properly record injuries at its Fairless Works in spite of the firm promise it had made in an earlier corporate-wide settlement agreement to correct those deficiencies," she said.

The citations issued yesterday included a doubling of proposed penalties for these previously cited record-keeping violations, which were supposed to have been corrected under the settlement Dole mentioned. That settlement was signed in April 1987.

"What they had done was underreported on their OSHA records the injuries and illnesses at the plant," Shanahan said. At the Fairless Works, the practice did not stop after the 1987 settlement, she said.

The Fairless Works, which employs 4,000 people, was cited by OSHA for 515 alleged violations of electrical safety requirements and 297 alleged cases of crane-safety problems.

The electrical violations included 200 to 300 cases of exposed live wires, Shanahan said. The crane problems

included cranes without brakes, failure to make other repairs and failure to do required inspections, she said.

OSHA also cited the Fairless Works for 91 alleged violations of occupational noise standards, 135 deficiencies in protective guards for machines and transmission equipment, six alleged violations of structural integrity standards, and 245 other violations.

Violations cited at the Clairton Works included numerous violations of electrical and structural-safety standards. Proposed penalties totaled \$1.2 million.

Wright, of the steelworkers union, said he hoped the citations would lead to changes at the plants. "We're not terribly interested in the size of the penalties," he said. "We would much rather see that money go into fixing the plants. We'll be talking to OSHA and USX about that."

The previous record fine proposed by OSHA was \$5.1 million against companies involved in a building collapse in Bridgeport, Conn. That fine is still being contested.

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